

ON PAGE 11-C

WASHINGTON TIMES
17 April 1986

Cuban exiles recall foulups, tragedies of island invasion

By Dan Sewell
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI — In the 25 years since their futile attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro, many of Miami's Cuban exiles have learned to laugh at some of the absurdities of the Bay of Pigs invasion.

Alfredo Duran remembers panicked Cuban soldiers surrendering in droves, so that within the first few hours the invaders were outnumbered by their own prisoners.

Manuel "Tony" de Varona recalls that at the time he was supposed to be declaring a new Cuban government, he was being held incommunicado by the U.S. military at an abandoned air base north of here.

Raul Masvidal talks of how his invasion craft ran out of fuel halfway to Cuba.

Rosa Noriega, whose husband was to join an internal uprising in Havana, notes that the coming invaders had sent letters to Cuba and called by telephone to notify friends and relatives of the CIA-directed, supposedly secret invasion.

But many are also still bitter, frustrated at the last-minute decisions in Washington they believed robbed them of their objective.

"I can only think of the Bay of Pigs as a tragedy," says Mr. Varona, a one-time Cuban vice president, now 77, who recalls meeting with a "very upset" President John F. Kennedy as the invasion was collapsing.

"It was a chance to end the tyrannical communist rule of Castro in my country, but it resulted in his expansion of it — to Nicaragua, to Angola, to the M-19 guerrillas in Colombia. And this could have been avoided, but for the serious mistake of President Kennedy in the final hour."

The sudden appearance of exile paramilitary groups training in the Everglades swamps in 1980, when the exodus of 125,000 Cubans in the Mariel boatlift seemed to indicate widening dissent in Cuba, ended just as suddenly in a few months. Mr. Castro has been in power 27 years.

The 25th anniversary of the Bay of Pigs will be marked here this week in a solemn ceremony by the Brigade 2506 organization of veterans. They will gather at a monument in this city's Little Havana area. There also will be more-private remembrances among the 650,000 Cubans of Miami's metropolitan area.

Sweet Cuban coffee-with-milk will be poured; so will Bacardi rum and Hatuey beer, products of their old homeland now made in their new one.

Many stories will be told. Here are some of them.

THE INVADER

Alfredo Duran, the teen-age son of a wealthy Cuban landowner and son-in-law of a former political leader, heard in February 1961 that exiles were training in Guatemala for an attempt to overthrow Fidel Castro.

He volunteered.

"They put us on a plane with blacked-out windows, but we knew we were going to Guatemala," he recalls.

In Guatemala, he spent days marching up and down mountains, carrying heavy equipment in heavy rains, training for fighting in the mountains of Cuba.

But Mr. Kennedy, having inherited a plan from the Eisenhower administration, was already making changes. Instead of the original plan, which was to take the port city of Trinidad while dropping invaders into the mountains to help anti-Castro guerrillas already there, he decided to try to mask the invasion as an internal insurrection.

On the morning of April 17, the 1,400 Cuban exile invaders heading to the beaches of the Bay of Pigs, still believed they would have full U.S. aerial support. They didn't.

"But the bizarre thing is, at the beginning, the Cuban militia were surrendering," Mr. Duran says. "They thought this was like the invasion of Europe. They didn't think they had a chance."

"We probably had 2,000 prisoners. We put the officers in an empty swimming pool and the others, we just took their arms away and let them wander around."

"By the third day, we were out of ammunition. But the Cuban soldiers made a very slow advance. They thought it was a trap."

Most of the invaders waited on the beach at Giron. Mr. Duran and others fled into a swamp of jagged rocks and little drinking water. He was caught 21 days later.

He was hauled by truck to Havana, where 1,189 Cubans were held 22 months until the United States ransomed them for \$53 million in food and medicine.

Unlike many Miami Cubans, who tend to be Republicans and supporters of President Reagan, Mr. Duran, at one time Florida's Democratic Party chairman, doesn't hold Mr. Kennedy's decisions against the party. He says Mr. Kennedy was simply too new on the job, too much under pressure from older liberals.

THE DETAINEE

It seemed everyone in Havana knew an invasion was coming. Rosa Noriega's quiet husband, Rudy, was in the loosely organized underground. When the invasion began, he was to meet others, go to a hidden arms cache, and begin fighting.

She was 18, with a 6-month-old son. She had refused to go along with the meetings, the rhetoric, the reading of Marxism-dominated newspapers at the Cuban Electric Co. where she was a secretary.

The morning of April 17, uniformed militiamen walked into her office, pointed rifles at her and said she was under arrest. She and some 80 others in the company of 7,000 people were led away. Across the island, tens of thousands were being taken. Some, perhaps hundreds, were shot.

At home, her husband learned that a neighbor, Sori Marin, had been executed.

Mrs. Noriega was taken to an old Spanish fortress that had been converted to a prison. She and dozens of other women were packed into the same cell, with a few cots

and a toilet.

A loudspeaker warned that the prisoners would die before any invaders reached them.

On the 16th day, at 3 a.m., her name was called. She was interrogated again, then told she could go home.

"Up until then, we had never thought of leaving Cuba," she says. "We thought the invasion would end communism. When the invasion failed, we lived in terror. We didn't know when they would arrest us."

The Noriegas left Cuba that August.

THE DRIFTER:

Raul Masvidal is a millionaire banker today. On April 17, 1961, he was the youngest member of a 40-man intelligence unit which was to follow the invasion through Cuban towns, helping set up local civilian support.

His was one of the last ships to leave Porto Cabezas, Nicaragua. But the old Navy cargo ship ran out of fuel and had to get help from a passing Texaco tanker.

By the time his ship got near Cuba, the invasion had started. The ship was told to remain some 25 miles offshore, near a U.S. flotilla.

They could see Castro planes flying over the invasion craft in the bay; then smoke rising. On the ship's radio, they overheard U.S. Navy pilots asking for permission to fire on the Cubans, and orders crackling back that no U.S. pilots were to get involved.

By the third day, failure was obvious, but Mr. Masvidal's ship remained at sea for 15 days.

Finally they were taken back to Nicaragua. They were told to hand over their weapons, .45-caliber revolvers and M-3 automatics.

They refused.

"We didn't know if the CIA was our friend or our enemy," Mr. Masvidal explains. "They finally brought in somebody from Miami we trusted to guarantee we would be taken home."

"A lot of thoughts went through my mind. Here we have come such a long way, all that training, all that going down the drain. Some of my closest friends were missing. All because Kennedy chickened out."

THE POLITICIAN:

Tony de Varona and four other Cuban exile leaders waited in a stark building in Opa-Locka for the flight that would take them to Cuba, where they would declare a new government, ask for recognition from Western countries, then seek friendly intervention to finish off Mr. Castro.

They waited for hours. It seemed they had become prisoners.

On April 18, they were instead flown to Washington. Pentagon officials traced the action on a large wall map. There were briefings. Then, a private meeting with the president.

"He seemed very nervous, very upset," Mr. de Varona recalls. "He said the brigade was being routed, that prisoners were being taken. He said he had suspended aerial support."

"He explained that this operation was not his plan."

"Then he said: 'I am the only one responsible. It is the largest responsibility I have had.'"